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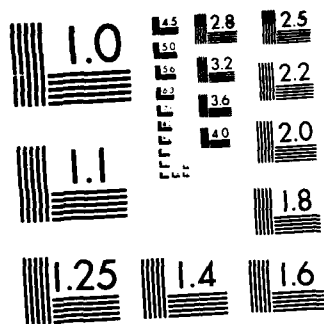
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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		READ INSTRUCTIONS BEFORE COMPLETING FORM
1. REPORT NUMBER	2. GOVT ACCESSION NO.	3. RECIPIENT'S CATALOG NUMBER
4. TITLE (and Subtitle) Relations with Fundamentalists Iran - A Dilemma for the United States		5. TYPE OF REPORT & PERIOD COVERED Study Project
7. AUTHOR(s) LTC Rizwan Qureshi		6. PERFORMING ORG. REPORT NUMBER
9. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS U.S. Army War College Carlisle Barracks, PA 17013		8. CONTRACT OR GRANT NUMBER(s)
11. CONTROLLING OFFICE NAME AND ADDRESS		10. PROGRAM ELEMENT, PROJECT, TASK AREA & WORK UNIT NUMBERS
14. MONITORING AGENCY NAME & ADDRESS (if different from Controlling Office)		12. REPORT DATE March 1988
		13. NUMBER OF PAGES 80
		15. SECURITY CLASS. (of this report) Unclassified
		15a. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE
16. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of this Report)  Approved for public release; distribution is unlimited.		
17. DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT (of the abstract entered in Block 20, if different from Report)		
18. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES		
19. KEY WORDS (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number)		
20. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse side if necessary and identify by block number) To people in the West, the leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran appears fanatical, irrational and well nigh impossible to deal with. And yet the West cannot afford to ignore Iran. For the United States, this is a particularly confounding situation, wherein a former and important ally refuses all contacts with her, resulting in a communication disconnect that leaves both parties at a disadvantage. But is the Islamic revolution a historical aberration without a future or a new and dynamic phenomenon with its roots in the past? An analysis of the Iranian example indicates that strong historical, political (con't)		

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

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RELATIONS WITH FUNDAMENTALIST IRAN - A DILEMMA  
FOR THE UNITED STATES

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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U.S. Army War College  
Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania 17013  
18 March 1988

# ABSTRACT

AUTHOR(S): Rizwan Qureshi, LTC, IN

TITLE: Relations with Fundamentalist Iran - A Dilemma for the United States

FORMAT: Individual Study Project

DATE: 18 March 1988 PAGES: 76 CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

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RELATIONS WITH FUNDAMENTALIST IRAN - A DILEMMA  
FOR THE UNITED STATES

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

With the Quran in one hand and a gun in the other, defend  
your dignity and honour. . . .

Ayatollah Khomeini  
March 21, 1980

ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM

What is Islamic fundamentalism? Is it a new and deviant creed in Islam, which has given rise to almost uncontrollable and irrational religious passions? Or is it something tantamount to magic, worked by a group of bearded fanatics; a magic that has caused the normally pleasant and easygoing Iranians to take leave of their senses? Such were the questions asked in the West following the revolution in Iran. The truth, however, was simpler, and not even exotic. The Iranians were only harking back to the very early days of Islam and attempting to enforce a system of government, wherein both religious and temporal authority was vested in a group of believers who ruled the country according to the edicts of the Quran and Shariah (the Islamic legal code). In the process, of course, they were rejecting not only their own monarchy but also the liberal western democratic tradition.

Islamic fundamentalism is certainly not a recent phenomenon. In fact, throughout the fourteen centuries of Islam, numerous movements have emerged, all desirous of regaining the purity and dynamism of the early days. And invariably, all have clashed with the established order. In the face of oppression and persecution meted out to them, most have been eliminated, while some went underground. The movement in Iran, however, achieved a successful

revolution, which resulted in the undoing of the regional power equation so painstakingly developed by the United States and her allies and putting to question many of the suppositions hitherto considered settled.

To many believers in fundamentalist Islam, Iran is the successful culmination of a struggle waged by their forebears over the centuries. To some, it is a movement that has gone astray. To the West, long accustomed to dealing with the liberal face of Islam, it is a frustrating and even incomprehensible phenomenon. For the United States, her transformation from Iran's closest ally to the "Great Satan" has been particularly confounding, posing her with dilemmas which in the short term appear almost beyond resolution. Most frustrating, perhaps, has been the realization that, with all her might, the United States is incapable of dealing with the impudent Iranians.

#### A COMMUNICATION DISCONNECT

So today, there is a veritable disconnect in communication (Irangate notwithstanding) between the United States and Iran. The two sides simply appear to operate on completely different frequencies and nothing seems to go right between them. This state of antipathy and confrontation is obviously detrimental to the interests of both. For the United States and her allies have to learn to live with Islamic fundamentalism, as much as Iran has to learn to deal with the rest of the world in a judicious and fair manner.

#### THE AIM

A look at the origins, course and aftermath of the Islamic revolution raises numerous questions. This paper attempts to answer only a few basic ones. It lays particular emphasis on three main aspects, viz., the evolution

of the Shiite tradition in Islam and the role of the ulama (religious leaders) in both temporal and religious affairs; the historical, socioeconomic and religious forces behind the revolution and how they affect the present character of the Islamic Republic; and finally the Islamic Republic's interaction with the West, particularly the United States. In the end an effort will be made to discuss future trends and policy options available to the United States in dealing with Iran and the Persian Gulf as a whole.

#### BACKGROUND

A well-known western scholar on Iran, Nikkie R. Keddie states:

The word 'Iran' is a cognate of Aryan; these words were used by that branch of the Indo-European peoples who migrated Southeast before 1,000 B.C., the Iranians staying in Iran and the Aryans going to India.<sup>1</sup>

Persia,<sup>2</sup> apparently, was a Greek name for Iran, which they had taken from the Iranian province of Fars;<sup>3</sup> and which has also given the Persian language its indigenous name, Farsi.

Geographically, Iran serves as a bridge between Europe and India. It also effectively controls the thin sliver of water that is the Persian Gulf. No wonder that for centuries it has been of great importance to international trade and strategy. And that numerous invaders have entered Iran; some staying on--ultimately coalescing with the local population--while others have carried on towards the east.

Iran had a highly developed history and culture, even before the advent of Islam--the most important landmark in Iranian history--mainly due to two major dynasties: the Achaemenians, 559-330 B.C.; and the Sassanians, 224-651 A.D. Together, these two dynasties gave the Iranians a civilization and culture which in their heydays surpassed all that the rest of the world could offer.<sup>4</sup> Today, like in the past, the Iranian is proud of his ancient

historical and cultural legacies which have shown a remarkable capacity of reasserting themselves in the face of foreign onslaughts. As Richard N. Frye states:

There is a great resilience amongst the Persians; through centuries of domination by foreigners they have withstood the influences of conquest, in the end conquering the conquerors.<sup>5</sup>

During her long history, Iran has seldom existed within her borders that we know today. Mostly remaining either as an empire acquiring neighboring territories or split up into smaller states ruled by petty chieftains, it was only in the nineteenth century, that the frontiers as they exist today began to emerge.

Iran also has a rich religious heritage. In fact, three religions, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and its offshoot, Mazdakism, originated and flourished in Iran during the pre-Islamic era.<sup>6</sup> Whereas, Islam has wiped out the religious content of these faiths, their social content has continued, perhaps awaiting an Islamic revolution to be finally obliterated.

A study of Iranian history provides many instances of uprisings against tyranny and oppression. The role of religion--be it Mazdakism or Islam--in these revolts has been quite significant. The Islamic revolution, therefore, should not have taken us by surprise, since, in Keddie's words, the Iranians were simply following:

a long tradition in both Iran and the Muslim world of expressing socioeconomic and cultural grievances in the only familiar way to most people--a religious idiom arraying the forces of good against the forces of evil and promising to bring justice to the oppressed.<sup>7</sup>

Well before the Islamic revolution, a careful study of the Iranian situation reveals ominous socioeconomic and cultural imbalances. But then, of course, we have the advantage of hindsight.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Nikkie R. Keddle, Roots of Revolution, p. 2.
2. In this paper, Iran and Persia have been used alternatively and may be considered synonymous.
3. Keddle, p. 2.
4. Laraine N. Carter, "History of the People," in Iran a Country Study, ed. by Richard F. Nyrop, pp. 23-33.
5. Richard N. Frye, Iran, p. 28.
6. Laraine N. Carter, "Religious Life," in Iran a Country Study, ed. by Richard F. Nyrop, pp. 111-115.
7. Keddle, p. 3.

## CHAPTER II

### EARLY ISLAM AND THE SHIITE - SUNNI DIVIDE

You are indeed the best community that has ever been brought forth for (the good) of mankind: you enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong and you believe in God.

Quran 3:110

### ORIGINS OF THE ISLAMIC FAITH

Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, was born in Makkah (Western Arabia) in 570 A.D.<sup>1</sup> into the Quraysh tribe. The Quraysh, well known for their martial exploits, were traders, when not fighting amongst themselves or the neighboring tribes. They were also the custodians of the Kaaba, the House of God, which according to Islamic tradition was constructed by the prophet Abraham. But the people of Arabia had, apparently, fallen on pagan ways, and the Kaaba housed numerous stone deities. The well known bedouin values had long since been forgotten and the Arabs were murderers, thieves and liars and even indulged in infanticide.

Muhammad had lived in this society for forty years, keeping himself at a distance from his kinsmen, when he received his first divine revelation. For the next twenty-three years these revelations, which today constitute the Quran, continued.

Islam is a monotheistic religion with a concept of good and evil and the hereafter. Muslims believe that Islam is the fulfillment of the Judeo-Christian tradition. They believe that, with the arrival of Muhammad, Christianity has been fulfilled, just as Christians believe that Judaism was fulfilled with the arrival of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus Christ and Moses, along with other prophets of the Judeo-Christian tradition, are also prophets to the Muslims, and Islam makes a categorical

differentiation between the "people of the book" (Jews and Christians) and those belonging to other faiths.

The five basic tenets of Islam are the Shahada (a declaration of faith in Allah and his final Prophet), prayers (to be said five times a day), fasting during the month of Ramadan, a yearly alms-giving and the pilgrimage to Makkah.

#### THE SOCIOPOLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Since the concepts of the day of judgement and the hereafter are fundamental, in this world Islam demands of its followers a total submission (also the literal meaning of the word Islam) to the devine will. The rituals of daily worship and the five daily prayer congregations (preferably in a mosque) regulate the activity of the entire day and ensure that religion is invariably present in Muslim society. In fact, in the longer term, the yearly fasting and alms-giving serve the same purpose.

The Quran and the Sunnah (the Prophet's example) provide to the Muslims a code of life covering not only the religious but also the temporal (in contemporary terms, a social and political structure). Whereas the social code has endured and is practiced in almost its original form in most parts of the Islamic World, the political system did not last very long after the Prophet's demise, being replaced by a hereditary caliphate that stifled all dynamic evolutionary processes.

#### CONCEPTS OF JEHAD AND MARTYRDOM

There are common misconceptions in the West regarding the concept of Jihad (Arabic for struggle and commonly understood as "holy war" in the West). Jihad is literally a struggle waged for good against falsehood and evil. Of

course, armed struggle is one means of waging this struggle, but nonviolent means can also be resorted to, as the Prophet Muhammad is known to have stated: "raising the voice of truth against a cruel and unjust ruler is a meritorious form of jehad." The ruler apparently could belong to any faith, a Muslim or otherwise.

It has also been promised in the Quran that those believers who are killed in the way of Allah shall receive salvation. This promise, to a great extent, motivates Muslims to join in the struggle against evil--be it a colonialist power or a "heretic Shah." It did so, fourteen centuries ago, and it does so even today as the Soviet Union has realized to her discomfiture in Afghanistan.

#### ALI AND THE CALIPHATE

The division of Muslims into two sects or denominations (both Shiites and Sunnis share the same fundamental beliefs and accept the other sect as believers) is more due to politics than religious differences.<sup>3</sup> The Prophet, due to evident reasons, had no difficulty in acting as both the religious and political guide of the nascent Islamic Empire. But after his demise in 632 A.D., the process of succession created many problems, and while the first two successors (caliphs) were both eminent and senior men who received a general acceptance from the populace, with the third, Uthman, there was considerable controversy.<sup>4</sup>

A significant minority from the very outset had believed that the succession belonged by right to the Prophet's descendants, more specifically Ali, his cousin and son-in-law (the Prophet left no living sons). Now, while the election of Uthman was being debated, this minority actively pressed his claim. And Ali possessed strong credentials indeed. He was a remarkably

brave and able military commander, a religious scholar and a trusted companion of the Prophet throughout his travails. Ali himself had not actively canvassed for his claim, but had repeatedly expressed his dissatisfaction with the religious policies of the first two Caliphs. This was particularly significant, since by this time the Islamic tradition of vesting spiritual and temporal powers in one person was well established. However, a compromise was ultimately worked out and the majority nominee, Uthman, was duly elected in 656 A.D., but the seeds of future discord were sown in Muslim ranks.<sup>5</sup>

From this juncture onwards, Islamic history is unfortunately full of political intrigues and assassinations. A few years after his election, Uthman was killed by a mutinous soldier. Once again, the question of succession gave rise to friction amongst the Muslim ranks. This time the protagonists resorted to war, with the supporters of Muawiya--a kinsman of Uthman--and the earlier Caliphs (the Ahl-al-Sunna) on the one hand and the partisans of Ali and the Prophet's Household (the Shi'at Ali) on the other. Some desultory fighting was followed by arbitration, the results of which are controversial to this day.<sup>6</sup> In the meantime, both leaders bided their time in separate governorships; Muawiya in Syria and Ali in Iraq. But in 661 A.D., Ali was murdered by a member of a radical Islamic sect and Muawiya was declared the caliph by the majority of the Islamic community.

Ali's tragic death ensured the future of Shi'ism. To the Shiites he is a martyr to the struggle against injustice and the usurpation of the Prophet's legacy to his heirs as leaders of the Islamic Nation.

#### KARBALA

But worse was to follow. Muawiya died in 680 A.D. and was succeeded by his son Yazid, thus establishing an heirarchic caliphate. The Ahl-al-Sunna

remained unmoved by this development, but once again there was much opposition by the Shiites. This time the banner of resistance was raised by Hussayn, Ali's second son. He marched from Makkah to Iraq--and certain defeat--with the purpose of opposing Yazid's accession. During his march defections further weakened him, and, greatly outnumbered, he faced Yazid's forces on the banks of the Euphrates at Karbala. Rejecting efforts to dissuade him from his chosen course, Hussayn and his companions (with the exception of an ailing son) were cut down by Yazid's forces.<sup>7</sup>

More than Ali's assassination, it is the tragedy of Karbala which perpetuated the schism between the Sunni and the Shiite sects of Islam--although Sunnis continue to deprecate Yazid's outrage as much as the Shiites. Ever since, the Shiites have been an oppressed and persecuted minority spread all over the Islamic World. Iran, however, is the only country where Shiite Islam is the state religion, having been declared as such in 1502 A.D. by the Safavid King, Shah Ismail.<sup>8</sup> But even before that significant event, Shiite and Iranian histories were closely related and interlinked.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Malise Ruthven, Islam in the World, pp. 49-100.
2. Laraine N. Carter, "Religious Life," in Iran, a Country Study, ed. by Richard F. Nyrop, p. 117.
3. Ruthven, p. 180.
4. Carter, p. 116.
5. Ruthven, pp. 180-183.
6. Michael M. J. Fischer, Iran, From Religious Dispute to Revolution, p. 16.

7. Ibid., p. 17.
8. Ruthven, p. 221.

### CHAPTER III

#### RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AND INSTITUTIONS IN IRAN

Nothing has been quite comparable to the impact which Islam made on Iran, not even the great influence of the West in recent time.

Richard N. Frye

#### THE IMAMATE

The most important institution of Shiism is the Imamate. This august office belongs to the Prophet's descendants through his daughter Fatima, the wife of Ali.<sup>1</sup> In all there have been twelve Imams (meaning those who set an example), and Shiites believe that the spiritual and temporal leadership of the Islamic World belongs to them. Since the Shiites were always in the minority, often oppressed and persecuted by the majority Sunnis, none of the Imams achieved real temporal power; and few died a natural death. In fact, the later Imams were forced into hiding for fear of their lives, their spiritual message passed to the faithful through intermediaries.<sup>2</sup>

The twelfth Imam finally went into the major occultation (hiding) in 939 A.D. Shiism believes that he will reappear on divine command as the Mahdi or Messiah.<sup>3</sup> In the meanwhile, the spiritual guidance of Shiite Islam rests with the ulama (religious scholars and leaders).

#### THE DAY OF ASHUR

It has often been said that, in Shiism, tragic events far outnumber the joyful.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this is a fair statement, considering the persecution and oppression suffered by the Shiites. But one of the most significant events in their religious calendar is the Karbala tragedy. The death of Hussayn and his companions on the tenth day of the Islamic month of Muharram is observed with

awesome fervor. The mourning commences on the first day of Muharram and reaches its climax on the ninth and tenth days with huge processions making their way through the city streets. The intense emotion and scenes of self-flagellation are indeed awe-inspiring and quite strange to Western eyes.

To the Shiites, the annual event is a reminder of the continuous battle between good and evil and the need to emulate Hussayn's sacrifice if all other measures fail. The Egyptian journalist Mohamed Heikal rightly states that amongst the Shiites, "there is what is called the Kerbala complex, the preoccupation with martyrdom as a particularly blessed and meritorious destiny, thanks to the example of Hussein."<sup>5</sup> Karbala, in the present as in the past, has aroused Shiite Muslims to a pitch of religious fervor, where the highest of sacrifices has been made without much hesitation.

#### THE RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

Shiite--and Iranian--religious life has evolved in a manner markedly different from the Sunnis. Most scholars have attributed this to the consolidation of Shiism in Iran since 1502 A.D. Since then, major Shiite religious institutions have centered in Iran and Iraq and away from the influence of the real source of Islam, Arabia.<sup>6</sup>

Shiite religious leaders have traditionally enjoyed much greater esteem amongst the laity than their Sunni counterparts. There are three main reasons for this. Firstly, following the occultation of the Imams, there was a need to continue the spiritual guidance provided to the people by them. Pending the return of the Imam, the ulama are required to provide the necessary direction.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, as a follow-up to the first, there developed in Shiism a tradition of ijtihad (interpretation of the Quran and Sunnah to resolve contemporary problems).<sup>8</sup> The mujtahids (those who conduct ijtihad)

have traditionally received great respect from the common man. Thirdly, ever since the Safavid era, Shiite religious leaders have been financially independent of the rulers, receiving contributions from the laity.<sup>9</sup> This has allowed them to stand up to the rulers in times of turmoil, thus gaining the respect of the populace.

The two most important centers of Shiite learning are the Mosque of Ali in Najaf (Iraq) and the Mosque of Fatima Masuma at Qom.<sup>10</sup> Students from all over the world come to acquire religious knowledge in these centers of learning. Six distinct grades are open to them; the first is the "talib ilm" and the ultimate is the "ayatollah al-uzma" (the great sign of God). There are traditionally five ayatollah al-uzma at one time who enjoy tremendous esteem and influence in both religious and temporal matters. The preeminent amongst these is called the Marjae Taqlid. Ayatollah Khomeini does not hold this title, but is certainly wielding more power than any Marjae Taqlid ever did.

#### ANALYSIS

The leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran are the heirs to a great and ancient cultural and religious legacy, who proceed about their business unfettered by the New World's conceptions of time and materialism. To the West this is incomprehensible and almost medieval.

Shiite Islam has a rather sad past, having suffered persecution and tyranny over many centuries. Resurgent and independent, it is in no mood to give way to any power on earth. This is obviously a classic case of revolutionary elation.

Islam extols martyrdom in general, while Karbala strengthens this amongst the Shiites. The good versus evil paradigm is available at all times to

exhort the populace. Before the revolution, it was the Shah who represented all that was evil; today it is the United States. It is interesting to note that Iranian offensives against Iraq (according to Iran, presently governed by a non-Muslim Baathist regime) in the Gulf War are named Karbala and serially numbered.

A review of ancient Iranian history establishes the resilience of her culture and civilization. Each invasion--with its alien cultural influences--has been followed by a period of indigenous reassertion. As such, the Sassanians have followed Alexander and his Greeks, the Abbasids the Arab Umayyads, and the Safavids the Turks. Viewed in this context, the Islamic Revolution appears to be a repeat of history--an attempt to reassert indigenous social and cultural (perhaps even religious) mores in a society almost overwhelmed by Western influences.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Laraine N. Carter, "Religious Life," in Iran, a Country Study, ed. by Richard F. Nyrop, p. 120.
2. Michael M. J. Fisher, Iran, From Religious Dispute to Revolution, pp. 20-21.
3. Carter, pp. 121-122.
4. Mohamed Heikal, Iran: the Untold Story, p. 82.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 83.
7. Nikkie R. Keddie, Roots of Revolution, pp. 17-18.
8. Malise Ruthven, Islam in the World, pp. 158-159.
9. Keddie, pp. 31-33.
10. Heikal, p. 83.

## CHAPTER IV

### A HISTORICAL REVIEW OF RELIGION AND POLITICS IN IRAN

Revolutions are not made. They come. A revolution is as natural as an oak. It comes out of the past. Its foundations are laid back in history.

Wendell Phillips, American Abolitionist

#### ISLAMIC CONQUEST AND CONSOLIDATION

The conquest of Sassanian Persia by the Islamic Arab armies in 637 A.D. is a historic landmark. The unsophisticated but highly motivated Arabs--though outnumbered--did not face much difficulty in routing the Sassanians, the latter having been exhausted by decades of unremitted campaigning against Byzantium.<sup>1</sup>

It was obvious from the very outset that the Arabs were in Persia, not for plunder and booty, but to settle the land. They, accordingly, treated the vanquished with consideration and kindness, particularly since the initial zeal of a nascent Islam was still alive. And contrary to popular belief, conversions to Islam were not obtained under duress. As the reputed scholar on Iran, Donald N. Wilber, states in this regard:

The Arabs overturned governments which were in a state of corruption and decay and the hope they held out to the great masses of the people of more equality and kinder treatment brought on a social and religious revolution. It is true, however, that there was no serious attempt at wholesale conversion to the Muslim religion. Much of the population of Iran converted to Islam in self-interest.<sup>2</sup>

This self-interest was normally economic advantage (non-Muslims had to pay a poll tax), advancement under the new authority or the quest for social emancipation by escaping from rigid and caste-bound societies. Despite all that Islam offered, however, it was to take more than three centuries before the whole of Persia converted to Islam.

With all their unsophistication, the Arabs went about consolidating their hold on Persia in a very astute manner. They retained most of the old administrative institutions and personnel. They also made a serious but low-key attempt to obliterate--although with dubious success--old Persian customs and practices, particularly those which ran counter to Islam. And, of course, they introduced Arab social and cultural influences into Persian society, throughout this process ensuring that religious and political control was retained by the caliph at Medina.<sup>3</sup>

#### ARAB VERSUS NON ARAB

The invading Arabs had found that, while Persia had a flourishing culture, she suffered from numerous social ills, such as extreme religious repression, economic inequity and a caste-bound society. Islam promised redemption from centuries of tyranny and oppression, and as a result it attracted conversions in large numbers.<sup>4</sup>

But as time went by, the Persian Muslims began to realize that, when it came to social and economic privileges, the Arabs had definite double standards. As L. N. Carter writes, the question was:

If submission to the will of God and the performance of good acts determined the nobility of man, why were the Iranians, who had many pious Muslims among them, consistently treated as inferiors, and why did Ummayyad leaders proclaim themselves as privileged elites?<sup>5</sup>

Obviously, there was no logical answer to this question. In fact, even before Islam, the Arabs of Hejaz (the Muslim Holyland) considered themselves the selected race, and the bestowal of the Quran and its divine message had further strengthened this notion. This rift between the Arab and the Ajamite (generic for all non-Arabs) was so wide even during the Prophet's lifetime that in a sermon before his death he was constrained to say that "neither

the Arab is superior to the Ajamite, nor the Ajamite to the Arab, except by his piety."

In Persia, however, demography ultimately decided the issue and the more populous Persians made it quite apparent that, while they could be devout Muslims, they were not prepared to accept an inferior standing in their own land. Thus was broken, according to Richard N. Frye, "the equation Islam equals Arab."<sup>6</sup> This development also led to prolonged strife between Arabs and non-Arabs, undertones of which are still visible in the ongoing Gulf War. But in the long run, it facilitated the spread of Islam to Europe, Africa, India and the Far East.

#### INTERACTION OF STATE AND RELIGION

In early Islam, the caliph was the religious and temporal authority for the Islamic nation. In those comparatively unsophisticated times this system was very desirable and worked very well. But as Islam gained new territories and power passed first to indigenous dynasties and often to invaders, it became almost impossible to achieve this ideal. True, there was always a caliph in Medina, or Baghdad, or more recently in Istanbul, but often he did not possess the military and political power to control his nominal domains, glad to receive allegiance in religious terms only.

This phenomenon first appeared in Iran at the beginning of the ninth century, when the Abbasid Caliphate, finding itself too weak to enforce its political writ, accepted the hereditary character of the ruling families in Iran. In other words, it forfeited the right to appoint a ruler and also lost temporal control over the country. In this regard, Richard N. Frye writes:

The first indications of the separation of religious and political functions in the Islamic world had appeared and this was to start lengthy and learned discussions among the Muslim savants on the nature of the Islamic state,

which ended under the Seljuqs in the political theory of the sultan in charge of temporal affairs while the caliph concerned himself with the religious and legal affairs.<sup>7</sup>

However, in 1502 the Iranians resolved this problem by declaring Shiite Islam as the state religion, rejecting the Sunni Ottoman Caliphate and once again making the shah responsible for both religious and temporal affairs.

More recently, it is possible that Reza Shah--the founder of the Pahlavi Dynasty--by not assuming the religious mantle, might have alienated a large number of his subjects.<sup>8</sup> Such drastic breaks with tradition have long-term and unforeseen effects. By divorcing himself from religion, he might have sown in part what his son was to reap in the 1970's.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Donald N. Wilber, Iran, Past and Present, p. 36.
2. Ibid., p. 37.
3. Richard N. Frye, Iran, pp. 45-46.
4. Laraine N. Carter, "History of the People," in Iran, a Country Study, ed. by Richard F. Nyrop, p. 35.
5. Ibid., p. 34.
6. Ibid., p. 35.
7. Frye, pp. 47-48.

## CHAPTER V

### COLONIAL EXPLOITATION

During the nineteenth century Iran became an important stake in the "Great Game" being played out between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia. Like Afghanistan, she was a useful buffer between these two powers, besides being a land bridge on the invasion route from Europe to India. And, although oil was yet to be discovered, the advantages of a captive market for British and Russian products were not negligible. So politically unsettled and militarily impotent, Iran was ravaged by these two powers. It was an experience that few Iranians have forgotten.

#### ANARCHY UNDER THE QAJARS

The Qajar Dynasty ruled Iran from 1796 to 1925.<sup>1</sup> This was a remarkable achievement, since at no stage did they possess an army either to defend their borders or to impose their writ inside the country. They dealt with local insurrections by pitching one group or tribe against the other through intrigue, treachery or financial blandishments. This was invariably possible, because the population comprised numerous tribes, ethnic groups and linguistic components living in scattered and isolated communities.<sup>2</sup>

However, dealing with foreign threats and pressures was not that easy. Although, they did try to play one power against the other, occasionally achieving some success, in the end they bartered away some territory, much of their sovereignty and substantial economic interests for a measure of international legitimacy and protection for the throne. And the price was ultimately paid by their subjects in economic deprivation, political oppression and anarchy.

### MILITARY ADVENTURES AND COLONIAL INTRIGUES

The advent of the nineteenth century saw Iran receiving considerable attention from Britain, Russia and France, as each of them vied for economic gains and political concessions. Governed by ineffective and selfish rulers, the Iranians looked on as impotent bystanders. The only dynamic force remaining was Islam, which brought the people out on the streets in protest every so often.

In 1807, Napoleon became the first European to sign a treaty with the Qajars, giving him access to India in exchange for arms needed by Iran to repel Russian advances.<sup>3</sup> Napoleon fell soon thereafter, but the Russo-Iranian conflict lasted for over a century. Not possessing a modern and regular military to face the Russians, by 1828, Iran had lost Georgia, Erivan and Nakhichevan in quick succession.<sup>4</sup>

The British, however, were kinder. They did not really wish to annex territory, but were more interested in achieving a measure of stability in the region, which would ensure the security of India's frontiers. And needless to mention, the economic motive was always an important consideration in their policies.

Sometimes in concert, and more often as protagonists, during the late 1800's Britain and Russia delineated Iran's borders with Turkey, Afghanistan, India and Russia (this time Russia took Merv).<sup>5</sup> Obviously, the Iranians were not consulted during this redrawing of the map.

### ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION

A major objective of all the political intrigues and military adventures was economic advantage. In fact, the pattern was well established by the beginning of the nineteenth century, thanks to Britain's "Indian experience."

The initial ingress was achieved by a seemingly legitimate desire for trade. This was followed by the stationing of military forces for the protection of commercial interests. These forces were later on employed to overcome local resistance and exact extraordinary trade concessions. As a result of these concessions, foreign goods flooded the market and local industry virtually ceased to exist. Iran also became a target of this policy in the nineteenth century.

The first "breakthrough" in Iran was made by the Russians through the Treaty of Turkomanchai, signed in 1828, which gave them significant trade concessions. This was followed by similar treaties with the British in 1836 and 1841.<sup>6</sup> The effects of these treaties have been aptly stated in the following words by Keddie:

On the economic side, free trade was forced on Asia even before it was accepted in the nineteenth-century bastion of free trade, Great Britain. Free trade might benefit a Britain whose advanced industries produced cheaper goods than did rest of the world, but in Asia, including Iran, forced low tariffs had a disruptive effect. Growing quantities of European manufactures that displaced Iranian crafts were freely imported, while the impossibility of protective tariffs under the treaties was one of the reasons why native industry could not develop.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most extensive treaty ever was signed with Baron Reuter (of the news agency and a British subject) in 1872. He received a concession covering railroad and streetcar construction, mineral extraction, irrigation works, various industrial and agricultural projects and even a bank in return for a modest initial payment followed by an equally insignificant annual royalty. This venture, of course, was fully backed by British power and their surprise and delight at the Baron's success were later aptly articulated by Lord Curzon, who called it "the most complete and extraordinary surrender of the entire industrial resources of a kingdom into foreign hands that had probably ever been dreamed of."<sup>8</sup>

### THE IRANIANS PROTEST

During the second half of the century, public sentiment against economic and political exploitation became increasingly evident. The first outburst of protest occurred in the spring of 1891 over the grant of a tobacco monopoly to a British subject. This "sellout" aroused universal opposition which quickly assumed the form of a mass uprising led by the ulama. Finally the Shah was forced to annul the concession. This movement is considered "the first successful mass protest in modern Iran, combining ulama, modernists, merchants and ordinary townspeople in a coordinated move against government policy."<sup>9</sup>

But worse was in store for the Qajars. After a decade of relative quiet popular discontent surfaced again in 1905, this time fanned by the momentous events taking place in neighboring Russia during the first decade of the twentieth century. The mantle of leadership was again assumed by the ulama who led the people into a "bast" (sanctuary) in the royal mosque in Tehran. The main demand on this occasion was the formation of Adalatkhaneh (house of justice).<sup>10</sup> Obviously, modern democratic sentiment was gaining strength amongst the populace. After prolonged agitation the Shah accepted the demand and the first "Adalatkhaneh," henceforth to be called the Majles (house of representatives), was formed in October 1906.

A seesaw battle between the Shah and the increasingly assertive Majles followed with the British and the Russians supporting the former. In November 1911, however, with the Russians poised to enter Tehran in support of the Shah, the Majles dissolved. This brought the first revolution in modern Iran to an end; it had lasted less than five years.<sup>11</sup>

## ANALYSIS

The plunder of Iran by Britain and Russia is not far enough in the past to be forgotten and forgiven; nor do the Shiites have a tradition of forgiving their tormentors. Revolutionary Iran harks back to this reprehensible period often in justifying their policies toward the West.

Another important consequence of the events of the nineteenth century is the strengthening of the traditional Christian-Muslim rivalry. For not only did the Christian West side with the opponents of the ulama led uprisings, but they also interfered in religious affairs. This perception of Christian interference is sure to agitate devout Muslims even today.

Public protest against exploitation and tyranny is common in history. But the Iranian experience is unique in its all-encompassing nature, spanning in its fold people from the entire social spectrum. Those who express surprise at the coalition that deposed the Shah are, perhaps, ignoring the lessons of history.

## ENDNOTES

1. Laraine N. Carter, "History of the People," in Iran, a Country Study, ed. by Richard F. Nyrop, p. 45.
2. Ibid., p. 46.
3. Richard N. Frye, Iran, p. 64.
4. Carter, p. 44.
5. Ibid., p. 46.
6. Nikkie R. Keddle, Roots of Revolution, pp. 43-45.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., pp. 58-59.

9. Ibid., pp. 66-67.
10. Ibid.
11. Frye, pp. 67-69.

## CHAPTER VI

### FIRST WORLD WAR AND THE RISE OF THE PAHLAVIS

#### THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The First World War was as much of a catastrophe for Iran--a declared neutral--as it was for the actual belligerents. Political and military impotence, geographic location and, above all, her potential oil resources (the first oil find was made in 1907) made her an unwilling participant in this momentous struggle.

Unlike India and China, where the War had stimulated industrial and urban development, Iran was devastated. A large number of people were killed, while many more were forcibly drafted to work on military projects. Farmlands were ruined and the all-important irrigation system damaged almost beyond repair due to neglect and military action. This, obviously, spelt disaster for an essentially agrarian and pastoral economy, the result being a famine in 1918-19, which killed as much as a quarter of the population of the northern regions.<sup>1</sup>

On the political front also, the War had significant--if not altogether negative--effects. The presence of Western forces and influence, and particularly the events in Russia, caused an upsurge in revolutionary sentiment, while the debilitating Qajar hold on the country was further weakened. Obviously, Iran was ripe for change.

But during this period, there appears an inexplicable inaction by the ulama. Perhaps the persecution that followed the events of 1911 kept them quiet.

CONTINUING COLONIAL INTRIGUES AND THE ARRIVAL  
OF THE UNITED STATES

The year 1921 brought good news. By the terms of a new Russo-Iranian treaty, the Communists renounced all imperialist policies and Tsarist treaties which were to the detriment of Iran. The treaty also accepted as final the existing border between the two countries.<sup>2</sup> But some clauses of this treaty are of considerable contemporary interest. It prohibited the existence of any armed organization in either Iran or Russia, whose aim was to "engage in acts of hostility" against the other and also allowed Russia to intervene against the troops of any power using Iran as a base of operations against her.<sup>3</sup>

A few months earlier, the British had also signed a treaty with the Iranian government, but had subsequently failed to get the approval of the Majles due to great public opposition. This treaty, which in effect made Iran into a British protectorate, was now implemented unilaterally.<sup>4</sup>

At this stage, Iran turned towards the United States. The Americans for some time had been keenly watching the situation. Their main interest, obviously, was Iran's oil resources. Accordingly, in August 1920, the State Department had instructed its Tehran representative in the following terms:

. . . you have discreetly and orally conveyed to the Persian Foreign Office information that the Department believes that American companies will seek concessions in the northern provinces and that the Department hopes that American companies may obtain such concessions.<sup>5</sup>

As regards British and Russian efforts to acquire favorable oil concessions, the State Department asserted:

The Department has taken the position that the monopolization of the production of an essential raw material, such as petroleum, by means of exclusive concessions or other arrangements, is in effect contrary

to the principle of equal treatment of the nationals of all foreign countries.<sup>6</sup>

The United States was now demanding its piece of the pie.

In 1921, the first oil concession to an American company (Standard Oil Company of New Jersey) was granted.<sup>7</sup> Over the next several decades, despite British protests, the United States provided advisers, loans and political support to Iran. Notwithstanding her economic interests, the American role during this period was much less exploitative than that of the British or Russians. Perhaps American democratic traditions and their own colonial experience were responsible for this.

#### REZA SHAH AND HIS TIMES

From this situation of anarchy and foreign exploitation emerged a man who dominated Iran for the next twenty years--Reza Shah. Starting his career as an uneducated soldier, Reza Shah had risen to command the Cossack Brigade by 1920--a position of considerable importance in the country. In 1921, he was appointed war minister and was instrumental in crushing the postwar revolutionary movements. In 1923, he sent the last of the Qajar Shahs into exile and, with the support of the British, emerged as a veritable dictator.<sup>8</sup> In October 1925, he was "handed the 2500-year old Persian crown"<sup>9</sup> by the Majles and the Qajar Dynasty formally came to an end.

Reza Shah was certainly a man of action. An admirer of Kemal Ataturk<sup>10</sup>--without, of course, his intellectual and organizational capabilities--he took upon himself the task of modernizing Iran. In the next twenty five years, he undertook numerous "reforms" in the country. For the first time in centuries, Iran had a regular army that could impose the government's writ internally as well as resist foreign military intervention.

The civil administration and the financial structure were also remodelled on Western lines and, perhaps for the first time, separate budgetary allocations were made for various social and government sectors. Efforts were also made to improve the industrial and agricultural sectors of the economy.

Reza Shah strongly believed that most of Iran's problems were due to her "archaic" educational system which emphasized study of the Quran, the Shariah and Arabic. He, therefore, actively encouraged Western education and opened many schools and colleges for this purpose. He also reformed the legal system--hitherto based on the Shariah--and introduced a new code based largely on the French system. By these measures, Reza Shah endeavored to reduce the power of the ulama who had risen in opposition to his reforms.<sup>11</sup> Islam, obviously, was not to play a significant role in modern Iran. As his son states:

The moral primacy of the spiritual over the temporal being indisputable and undisputed, it was a matter of bringing Iran into the twentieth century, . . . . Reza Shah asserted that in the twentieth century it was impossible for a nation to survive in obscurantism.<sup>12</sup>

As regards social and cultural mores, Reza Shah actively supported Westernization. He decreed Western dress for men and relaxed restrictions on women. The elite, including members of the court, military and civilian officials and the "nouveau riche"--contractors and merchants who had benefitted from the war--avidly adopted the new life style, while, of course, the large majority of the population carried on in the old manner.

All these reforms were imposed in an authoritarian manner with the active support of the Western powers whose exploitative yoke Reza Shah had earlier tried unsuccessfully to overthrow. He paid scant regard to the Majles or the common man, whom he taxed heavily to fund his reforms. He also ignored the religious sentiments of the ulama and the vast majority of the faithful in his

drive towards modernization. And yet, due to corruption, lack of requisite infrastructure, poor planning and inept execution, his reforms were only partly successful.<sup>13</sup>

Above all, his reforms resulted in a polarization of society, a situation that was exacerbated during his son's reign. The upper and rising middle classes accepted the Western life-style--a concomitant of Western style modernization--with its accruing privileges, and distanced themselves from the traditional Iranian spiritual and cultural values. On the other hand, the vast majority of their compatriots continued to follow the old life-style with its emphasis on religion and traditional Iranian culture.<sup>14</sup> This polarization would lead to dire consequences in the future. But Reza Shah--the man of action--did not have the prescience to foresee the explosive mixture that he was creating.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Nikkie R. Keddie, Roots of Revolution, p. 81.
2. Richard N. Frye, Iran, p. 73.
3. Zalmay Khalilzad, "Soviet Dilemmas in Khomeini's Iran," in Iran Since the Revolution, ed. by Barry M. Rosen, pp. 119-120.
4. Keddie, p. 82.
5. Ibid., p. 85.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 89
8. Donald N. Wilber, Iran, Past and Present, pp. 125-127.
9. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Answer to History, p. 51.
10. Ibid.
11. Frye, p. 79.

12. Pahlavi, p. 55.
13. Keddie, pp. 110-111.
14. Ibid.

CHAPTER VII  
SECOND WORLD WAR AND THE MOSSADEQ REVOLUTION

THE SECOND WORLD WAR

History repeated itself during the Second World War. As if the lure of oil was not enough, control of Iran provided the belligerents with significant strategic advantages. For the Germans, she provided an access to the Russian flank, while, to the Allies, besides denying the Germans this flank, she provided a route for dispatch of desperately needed war materiel to Russia.<sup>1</sup>

Reza Shah being favorably disposed towards the Germans, refused the Allied ultimatum to expel German advisers working in Iran. Accordingly, in August 1941, British and Russian troops entered the country. Reza Shah was forced to abdicate and his son Mohammad Reza was installed on the Pahlavi throne.<sup>2</sup> The country was now conveniently divided into three zones: the Russians occupied the North, the British the South, and the Central Zone, including Tehran, was left unoccupied. The Allies also guaranteed to help the Iranian economy recover from war damage and to withdraw their troops within six months of the end of the war.<sup>3</sup>

The War brought considerable socioeconomic and political upheavals in Iran. There were shortages and galloping inflation, and the poor became poorer while a new business class--from war generated economic activity--strengthened the ranks of the Iranian elite. On the political side, there was extreme polarization within the national body-politic as the Communist Tudeh Party and the rightist National Will Party were locked in an intense struggle.<sup>4</sup> Between these two extremes was a National Group led by Mohammad Mossadeq, who was to gain much prominence in the fifties. And of course, there was the new Shah; but he was too young and unversed in Iranian politics

to stabilize the situation. On the positive side, however, Iran did not become a battleground for the belligerents and, compared to the First World War, there was much less devastation.

The war years did not witness much agitation or political activity by the ulama, although resistance against western culture and dress continued at a low-key. The politicians had gained center stage and would continue to do so until the sixties.

Another development of considerable significance was the Russian role in the immediate postwar period. After the formal end of the War in April 1945, they refused to withdraw from the Northern Zone, thus violating not only the 1941 agreement between the Allies but also the Russo-Iranian Treaty of 1921.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, the victorious Communists were now prepared to play their role as an emerging superpower.

The Russians actively helped the leftist forces in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan to set up autonomous governments and their forces resisted Iranian efforts to terminate the rebellion. Ultimately, it took months of delicate negotiations and considerable coercion by Britain and the United States before the Russians agreed to withdraw in March 1946.<sup>6</sup> The Azerbaijan and Kurdistan autonomous governments continued to exist until finally brought down by Iranian forces in November 1946. Needless to say, this incident has dogged Russo-Iranian relations ever since.

#### THE RISING TIDE OF AMERICAN INFLUENCE

The Second World War had dealt a shattering blow to British imperialism, and as British power waned, the void was filled by the United States. Soon the brash and cheerful representatives of Uncle Sam in their seersucker suits could be found all over the developing world.

In Iran, the British were unpopular because of their exploitative policies, while Russian influence had suffered badly because of the Azerbaijan and Kurdistan episodes. The Iranians, therefore, turned towards the United States for help in their postwar development.

Over the next few years, the United States made rapid gains in Iran, largely due to military and civilian advisory and assistance programs.<sup>7</sup> Of course, this allowed the Americans to obtain numerous oil concessions, but it also goes to their credit that these concessions favored Iran much more than those that the British had negotiated. Besides, the Americans created a favorable impression by dealing with the Iranians in a more circumspect and equitable manner; after all, they lacked the colonizing experience of the British and the Russians.

#### THE MOSSADEQ REVOLUTION

To most Iranians, even today, Mohammad Mossadeq is a hero who for a brief period in the early fifties gave Iran a measure of pride and independence that she had not enjoyed for a long time. To the late Shah of Iran he was a Robespierre or a Rienzi,<sup>8</sup> the ultimate in political intrigue and treachery. But even he is forced to admit that Mossadeq was a patriot<sup>9</sup>--albeit with leftist sympathies.

He came to power in April 1951--against the wishes of both the Shah and the Western Powers--and promptly made good on his promise to nationalize the AIOC (the Anglo Iranian Oil Company) which had refused persistent Iranian demands for an increase in royalty payments. This made him a hero and a symbol of Iran's quest for national independence, receiving the active support of not only the ulama but also of the Tudeh Party. During this period, the Tudeh became increasingly active and followed a policy of supporting popular

nationalist demands while suggesting that Iran would be better off having stronger ties with Russia. Under pressure from the nationalists and the leftists, Mossadeq pushed through laws which imposed taxes on large landholdings and businesses, thus unfairly earning for himself a reputation of being a communist sympathizer.

Mossadeq's populist policies made him unpopular with the Shah and his Western friends. Accordingly, in mid-1952 the Shah suddenly announced his dismissal and replacement by one of his trusted advisers, Qavam-as-Sultaneh. But the resulting mass demonstrations in Mossadeq's support made the Shah back down and he came back stronger than ever.<sup>10</sup>

But the nationalization of the AIOC had not brought the expected economic results, mainly because the Western nations, including the United States, had engineered a worldwide boycott of Iranian oil. The resulting hardship to the public now began to hurt his popularity and caused some defections, particularly amongst the left and the ulama.

Mossadeq's main weakness, however, was his failure to obtain the support of the army, which remained loyal to the Shah. Heartened by his loss of popular support, Mossadeq's enemies once again plotted his overthrow. This time they had an important ally, the Americans, who had decided that Mossadeq's leftist sympathies and refusal to negotiate with the oil companies was not in their interest.<sup>11</sup> The CIA now took over the task of Mossadeq's ouster. Somehow the plot was discovered before it could be executed and the Shah had to flee the country. But the CIA had the last word. On 19 August 1953, they engineered large scale demonstrations against Mossadeq in which the army and some ulama joined in. The call for Mossadeq's departure rang loud and clear and, in the face of such opposition, he quickly capitulated. His revolution had lasted less than three years.

In retrospect it appears certain that the coup was engineered by the CIA (through Kermit Roosevelt) on the basis of British and American proposals. "The coup could not have succeeded without significant internal dissatisfaction or indifference, but without outside aid it would not have occurred."<sup>12</sup> The triumphant return of the Shah signalled the total domination of the United States over Iranian affairs which was to continue for over two decades. Needless to say, within a year the Shah had concluded a new agreement with the oil companies which left the control of this precious resource in foreign hands.

#### ANALYSIS

Whereas the miserable state of affairs in Iran during the nineteenth century can be blamed on ignorance and apathy, the positive trends witnessed during the first half of the current century must be ascribed to foreign influences brought in by the Western nations. This period saw the emergence of politicians and strong men who attempted to modernize the country on Western lines, thus engendering revolutionary and democratic aspirations that could be temporarily muzzled, but never denied. In this respect, therefore, the secular revolutionaries who joined forces with the Islamic fundamentalists against the Shah owed much to Western political thought and influence.

The villains of the nineteenth century were Britain and Russia. But during the first half of the present century their influence waned and the United States took their place. Powerful, overconfident and unversed in the niceties of diplomacy, she overtly interfered in Iranian internal affairs. But times had changed, and by the time of the Mossadeq episode the age of colonialism was at an end. The anti-American sentiments aroused by this incident have continued to color Iranian perceptions of the United States;

and, of course, Mossadeq remains a heroic symbol of the Iranian struggle for economic and political independence.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the ulama remained curiously inactive during these momentous times, while secular personalities took the center stage. There is no apparent cause for this apathetic attitude. Perhaps, they awaited a personality like Ayatollah Khomeini to spur them to action.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Richard N. Frye, Iran, pp. 81-82.
2. Ibid.
3. G. Lenczowski, Russia and the West in Iran, 1918-1948, p. 175.
4. Nikkie R. Keddie, Roots of Revolution, pp. 116-117.
5. Ibid., pp. 119-120.
6. Ibid.
7. Frye, pp. 87-91.
8. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Answer to History, p. 84.
9. Ibid., p. 92.
10. Frye, p. 97.
11. Keddie, pp. 138-140.
12. Ibid.

CHAPTER VIII  
THE SHAHANSHAH AND HIS TIMES

On this historic day when the whole country renews its  
allegiance to its glorious past, I, Shahanshah of Iran  
call history to witness that we, the heirs of Cyrus, have  
kept the promise made two thousand five hundred years ago.

Mohammad Reza Pahlavi  
October 15, 1971

EDUCATION OF AN ORIENTAL MONARCH

The seeds of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's tragedy lie, perhaps, in his initial education and training. As he himself states, at the age of six he was entrusted to a French governess who gave him a proficiency in the French language and an appreciation of Western culture. Later, after graduation from the Tehran elementary military school, he was dispatched to an elite Swiss school where he came to admire historical figures like Charles V of Spain, Peter the Great of Russia, and Henri IV, Louis XIV and Napoleon of France. On return from Europe, he received military training at the Iranian military school under officers trained at St. Cyr (the French Military Academy).<sup>1</sup> At first glance, there was nothing wrong with this education. But the question may be asked; was this education good enough to lead an oriental and deeply religious nation, ninety percent of whose population was ignorant of Western culture and social mores? Perhaps not; the Shah was as much of an outsider in Iran as an Iranian educated king would have been in France.

AUTHORITARIANISM AND THE STIFLING OF THE MAJLES

Despite reverses during the Reza Shah period, the Majles, which had come into existence through the 1906 Constitution, continued to enjoy a reasonable measure of independence in the immediate postwar period. Thus, it had made

possible the rise of Mossadeq in 1951. After Mossadeq's fall, the Shah, with American encouragement, proceeded to neutralize the Majles.<sup>2</sup> For the next twenty-five years the Shah had a rubber stamp Majles achieved through vote-rigging and pressure tactics, which invariably passed without much ado all the bills that the Shah sent to them.

With the neutralization of the Majles, the Shah had no constitutional opposition to contend with. Of course, this made him a despot and gave him delusions of infallibility; but it also sent his opposition underground, ultimately proving more dangerous than a constitutional opposition.

#### SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DICHOTOMIES

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the early part of the twentieth century witnessed a grave polarization of Iranian society. The rich became richer and Westernized while the poor remained wedded to their religious and cultural values. Keddie describes the increased polarization during the Shah's rule as under:

Western values did not trickle down to the popular classes any more than did significant benefits from the (Shah's) modernization program. Ultimately the vast majority of Iranians became more anti-Western, more anti-Shah and more open to oppositionists who stood against the Shah, the West and Western ideas.<sup>3</sup>

The Shah obviously was the leader of the Westernized elite, but by distancing himself from the majority of his subjects, he ultimately fell into the same trap into which several contemporary monarchs, particularly Faruq of Egypt, had fallen before him.

### ECONOMIC DEPRIVATIONS AND DISPARITIES

Fereydoun Hoveida, a former Iranian diplomat, giving his experiences of travel through Iran during December 1944 with a group of American soldiers, writes:

The soldiers ate their breakfast on the spot and threw the leftovers into drums spaced out along the platform, before reembarking. At once the tattered Iranians rushed to the dustbins and delved into them for the discarded bits of breads, orange peel and banana skins, which they wolfed down greedily.<sup>4</sup>

Since then, the Iranian economy has improved tremendously, in the initial postwar years due to American loans and, thereafter, due to ever-increasing oil prices. During the sixties and early seventies the Shah invested a considerable portion of these resources to further the objectives of the White Revolution, an initiative for social, administrative and economic reforms.<sup>5</sup> As a result, during the period 1965-77, per capita income increased from \$300 to \$2,200, thus substantially improving the lot of Iran's poor.<sup>6</sup> There was considerable improvement also in the educational and health sectors, and the Shah was able to partially implement a land reforms program, despite the opposition of most of the ulama, substantially increasing agricultural output.

Yet, there were pockets of poverty, particularly in the major cities, which were bursting at the seams due to large scale migration of the population from the rural areas, a common enough phenomenon in developing states. This manifold increase in the urban population--in Tehran, population increased from 1.7 million in 1954 to 4.5 million in 1978<sup>7</sup>--caused a breakdown of civic amenities and presented a stark contrast between the lifestyles of the elite and the underprivileged majority. Hoveida states:

The capital was split into two separate towns: to the north, a wealthy metropolis, living in European style luxury villas surrounded by restaurants, discotheques and nightclubs; to the south a poverty-stricken city of narrow alleys and polluted air, inhabited by the poor.<sup>8</sup>

Undoubtedly, the lot of the average Iranian had improved considerably during the Shah's rule; but the existing disparities and contradictions in Iranian society had also increased with the rich benefitting much more than the poor. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the major cities, from whose poor and disaffected the revolution was to receive much of its support.

#### TYRANNY AND REPRESSION

The Shah, during his reign--and particularly during the last few years--created thousands of martyrs. He certainly did not understand the Shiite Islamic ethos of the opposition as it gained strength from the oppression and acts of cruelty perpetrated against it. He was, obviously, behaving like an "occidental colonial monarch in an oriental nation."

But the Pahlavis were not the first to use repression and persecution against their subjects. The Iranian tradition in this respect is well established and goes back thousands of years. Unfortunately for the Shah, he ruled Iran in times when tyranny and human rights abuse, although not uncommon, were the target of worldwide condemnation. The situation was further exacerbated for the Shah by the presence abroad of thousands of Iranian students,<sup>9</sup> who once exposed to Western liberalism, carried out an effective campaign of maligning his image in the West.

Another interesting aspect of the human rights situation is the American attitude, particularly during the period that the Shah was serving as the "Policeman of the Gulf." A stream of American politicians from the President

downwards visited the country during the early seventies and gave statements encouraging his authoritarianism, and even envied the way he dealt with his students.<sup>10</sup> Obviously, when the chips were down, human rights did not matter much.

The SAVAK (Organization for State Security and Information) gained particular notoriety during the sixties and seventies. Following the political troubles of the early sixties, the Shah became more and more authoritarian and repressive and gave a free rein to the SAVAK, which, of course, did not let him down. There are numerous documented incidents of torture and abuse of the opposition by SAVAK and even the Shah admits that: "I cannot defend SAVAK's every action and will not attempt to do so here. There were people arrested and abused. Unfortunately, this is not a perfect world."<sup>11</sup>

#### CORRUPTION AND MORAL DEGRADATION

Graft and corruption are, perhaps, concomitants of economic development in the developing world, being the necessary lubrication to move the rigid bureaucratic machinery. But with the easy oil money flowing into Iran, corruption took on a totally different complexion. The Shah's largesse, in addition to the royal family, was for all those who simply agreed with him: sycophants, unprincipled politicians, touts, pimps, and military and civilian officials whose contributions toward their organizations and the nation were absolutely nil. Of course, there were exceptions, to whom Iran owes much; but most of these honorable men were either weeded out or ultimately forced to join the system. This state of affairs created an elite class without a stake in the country's welfare, and whose profligacy both at home and abroad far exceeded the worst of the Qajars. And, of course, it must be remembered

that the Qajars had ruled Iran during the nineteenth century, while the 1970's presented a different environment altogether.

L'ETAT C'EST MOI

On October 14, 1971, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi;, King of Kings, Light of the Aryans, stood before the tomb of Cyrus the Great and intoned:

To you, Cyrus, Great King, King of Kings, from Myself, Shahanshah of Iran, and from my people, hail. . . .  
Cyrus, we stand before your eternal dwelling place to speak these solemn words: Sleep on in peace forever, for we are watching, and we shall remain to watch over your glorious heritage.<sup>12</sup>

The next day he crowned himself the Shahanshah of Iran amongst the ruins of Persepolis, the capital city of the Achaemenians. The coronation ceremonies, "unfolding like a costume movie," had cost millions of dollars and instead of impressing the world--as they were meant to do--only served to emphasize the Shah's extravagance and lack of taste. The event also signified his increasing megalomania as well as his efforts to acquire legitimacy by establishing ties with the glorious Achaemenians.

The Shah was now fully in control of his country and in the next few years would become the "Policeman of the Gulf," thanks to the Nixon Administration's strategic doctrines. But, instead of relaxing his internal policies and accepting democratic dissent, he became increasingly imperial and despotic, thus hastening his own fall by coalescing the various sections of the opposition.

The last few years are remarkable for his isolation, not only from his subjects, but also from his trusted advisers and family members.<sup>13</sup> This situation further divorced him from reality.

### THE SHAH AND HIS ARMED FORCES

From the very outset the Shah had been remarkably successful in retaining the loyalty of the Armed Forces. This was achieved essentially by keeping the officer corps satisfied through financial blandishments and privileges far in excess of those normally granted in democratic states. As regards the enlisted ranks, however, he was far less concerned. But in the early seventies, with the massive induction of sophisticated arms, the complexion of the enlisted manpower changed. They were now more educated, aware of their rights and privileges, and politicized. This demanded a different quality of leadership which the Shah's officer corps failed to provide. Ultimately like the rest of Iranian society, cultural and religious polarization took root within the armed forces also, resulting in many junior and enlisted personnel supporting the revolution, while the senior officers remained loyal to the Shah.

### FOREIGN POLICY

In his last book, "Answer to History," the Shah shows an almost compulsive dislike for the Soviets and communism. Viewing Soviet advances during the seventies, he fears the "Finlandization of Europe"<sup>14</sup> in three years (by 1983) and the domination of Southwest Asia in a slightly longer time-span. It was just this obsession with Soviet expansionism that made him a permanent ally of the West, despite Iran's unhappy experiences of the past centuries.

With the increase in oil revenues during the seventies, the Shah could now assume his "pre-destined" role in regional affairs. He, accordingly, embarked upon a massive arms acquisition program which suited not only Western strategy but also their economic interests. So for a few years in the mid-seventies, the Shah was the "Policeman of the Gulf," actively interfering in regional affairs and conflicts in support of Western interests.

But as clouds gathered on the horizon, the Shah blamed the United States for failing to support him in his efforts to deal with the opposition,<sup>15</sup> a charge not entirely untrue, since by October 1978 the United States had concluded that the Shah could not be expected to stay in power. Thereafter, all her efforts were directed at promoting the unity of the armed forces, which could be expected to take over power after the Shah's ouster. But conventional wisdom proved wrong on this occasion.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Answer to History, pp. 63-64.
2. Nikkie R. Keddie, Roots of Revolution, pp. 145-146.
3. Ibid.
4. Fereydoun Hoveyda, The Fall of the Shah, p. 70.
5. Ibid., p. 74.
6. Ibid., p. 73.
7. Pahlavi, p. 122.
8. Hoveyda, p. 97.
9. Pahlavi, pp. 146-152.
10. Hoveyda, p. 77.
11. Pahlavi, p. 158.
12. Hoveyda, pp. 116-117.

13. Ibid., p. 143.
14. Pahlavi, p. 13.
15. Ibid., pp. 164-166.

CHAPTER IX  
RESURGENT FUNDAMENTALISM

ULAMA AND THE SHAH

By supporting the popular demand for a house of parliament at the beginning of the century, the ulama, in fact, encouraged a secularist-modernist movement at the cost of their own influence in temporal affairs.<sup>1</sup> The Pahlavi reforms, later on, strengthened the military-bureaucratic structure in the country, providing the Shah with a power base independent of ulama support. The break up of landed estates, female enfranchisement and control of religious endowments further weakened ulama influence. Above all, perhaps, the reason for ulama inaction during the first half of this century was the absence of a strong and charismatic mujtahid who could face the Pahlavis. The limited role of the ulama in the Mossadeq episode can, therefore, be attributed to the ambivalent attitude of the Marjae-Taqlid Ayatollah Borujerdi as well as the other leading Ayatollahs.<sup>2</sup>

The first real religious challenge to the Shah's authority came in 1963. The early sixties had been difficult years for the Shah. Economic problems, authoritarianism, subservience to Western powers and resistance to Western-style reforms had resulted in great public outcry. By 1963, however, through repression and political manipulation, the Shah had once again achieved control of the Majles. At this juncture, the ulama raised the standard of opposition against him. The religious opposition was promptly labeled "as a purely reactionary and largely selfish response"<sup>3</sup> to the Shah's reforms. In fact, the crucial issues were subservience to the United States and good relations with Israel. Two out of this group of ulama, Ayotallahs Khomeini

and Shariatmadari, were destined to achieve much prominence in the years to come.

For Ayatollah Khomeini, however, the struggle against the Shah continued uninterrupted until its climax fifteen years later. In 1963 he began to preach openly against the Shah. In March 1963, his Madrasa (religious school) was attacked by paratroopers and the SAVAK, and a number of students were killed, while Ayatollah Khomeini was detained for some time. On his release, he continued to preach against United States control of Iran and denounced America as an enemy of Islam because of her support of Israel. On the day of Ashura 1963, he was arrested and the mourning processions in almost all major cities turned into demonstrations against the Shah and his mentors, the Americans. These demonstrations were suppressed several days later, with considerable loss of life.<sup>4</sup>

This incident, most ineptly handled by the Shah, gave Khomeini an eminence much beyond his status amongst the Ayatollahs. It also resulted in his exile to Iraq from where he exhorted his followers to continue their struggle.

By the mid-sixties, the Shah had established a military-bureaucratic structure which made him confident of his ability to face threats from any quarter. But by divorcing himself from Islam--the very core of a Muslim community--he denied himself an ingress into the spirit of his subjects. The cost of Western style economic and administrative reforms should not have been an undermining of Iranian religious and social values. Till his death he did not comprehend this basic truth.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps, his education and upbringing were responsible for the tragedy that eventually overtook him.

In the absence of Ayatollah Khomeini, his exhortations--in print or audio-cassettes--kept the pot of resistance boiling in Iran. The SAVAK did

much to increase the bitterness, not only amongst the religious elements but also amongst the students, the bazaaris (merchants), the urban dispossessed and also the left, thus forcing these diverse forces to forge an alliance, which by tradition was led by the ulama. Each year provided numerous religious anniversaries which invariably turned into protest demonstrations and produced increasing numbers of martyrs. The Shah, of course, could have come to terms with the protestors, whose demands in the initial stage were not difficult to meet; but, apparently, his megalomania never allowed him to do so.

#### THE RESURGENCE OF ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM

The postwar decolonization process brought freedom to almost all Islamic countries. But the legacy left by their former masters was indeed terrible: underdevelopment, illiteracy, lack of political and administrative institutions, cultural and religious confusions, and above all the specter of neocolonialism in the form of continuing political and economic exploitation. Their new rulers, in the face of all these difficulties and constraints, simply failed to come up to expectations.

For the first few years the problem was measured in economic terms only. Then it became apparent that the political and administrative deficiencies were the main hurdles to progress. A small minority reasoned that religious and cultural confusions--due to a continuing ascendancy of Western political and cultural thought in the world--were at the root of all troubles faced by the Muslim world. Once the original religious and temporal principles of Islam were adopted, the Muslims were certain to catch up with the developed countries.

The dispirited Muslims looked at the West and the East, but both appeared to be in trouble themselves. In the meantime, matters were moving from bad to worse. The Arabs were losing to the Jews and elsewhere the enemies of Islam were also on the ascendance. Despite its riches, the vast majority of the Muslim World lived in poverty. Internally, most Muslim countries were ruled by despots whose main interest was the perpetuation of their own rule. Obviously, the dream of a united and strong Islamic world was as distant as ever. In this hopeless situation many Muslims turned to religion.

The twentieth century had witnessed several important revivalists movements in Egypt, Iran and the India-Pakistan subcontinent. Each strove to replace Western ideologies by a system based upon the Quran and the Shariah. None of these had enjoyed much popularity, suffering considerable repression and persecution. Now suddenly these creeds are popular. Muslims are discarding Western political systems and looking at Islam, not only for spiritual but also worldly salvation. The stage is set for a new Crusade, a struggle between Western ideologies and Islam.

Many Muslims perceive that the first round has been won. Iran is a source of some pride, much awe and hope for the future. Today, the existing "moderate" order in many Islamic nations faces an unprecedented threat from fundamentalist forces. It is a threat that can, perhaps, be contained, but not eliminated entirely keeping in view the present world environment.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Hossein Bashiriyeh, The State and Revolution in Iran, pp. 58-59.
2. Nikkie R. Keddie, Roots of Revolution, p. 157.
3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., pp. 158-159.

5. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Answer to History, pp. 175-179.

## CHAPTER X

### CONSOLIDATION OF THE NEW ORDER AND ITS WORLD VIEW

#### THE FUNDAMENTALISTS TAKE CHARGE

As mentioned earlier, the revolution had been brought about by an alliance including all sectors of Iranian society. Consequently, after the revolution, several hitherto suppressed political parties and movements resurfaced to participate in remoulding the political process. The first postmonarchical government of Mehdi Bazargan included a broad spectrum of ideological and political representation, except for the Marxists who were, nevertheless, quite active. It was now widely believed that, following the success of the revolution, the ulama would return to their mosques, as per tradition, and provide spiritual and ideological guidance to the secular politicians. But this was a mistake; this time the ulama intended to run the country, and to be fair to them, Ayatollah Khomeini had made this quite clear in his pre-revolution statements.<sup>1</sup>

The first revolution was over, but the second was yet to be completed which would rid the country of centrist, Western educated liberals and the left, comprising the rather weakened Tudeh Party, the Marxist-Leninist guerrilla organization, Fedayeen-e-Khalq and the non-Marxist Islamic leftist guerrilla movement, Mojaheddin-e-Khalq. The secular elements in the government were soon besieged by a group of revolutionary Islamic organizations which literally forced the government to follow the dictates of the radical clerics, who, of course, had the full approval of Ayatollah Khomeini.<sup>2</sup>

The first to be eliminated were the secular and Western educated liberals, when the students who carried out the American Embassy hostage operation accused them, with some documentary proof, of having links with the

United States government.<sup>3</sup> In the meantime, the Tudeh Party and other leftist guerrilla organizations continued to cooperate with the religious elements who were strengthening their hold over the country. But in 1982, a Soviet diplomat defected to Britain and divulged the names of Tudeh operatives within the Iranian government. This was a signal for the commencement of large scale purges, arrests and subsequent executions of several high ranking military members of the Party.<sup>4</sup> The leftist guerrilla organizations went underground but continued to operate against the Islamic government. Their major successes were the assassinations of several eminent government leaders in the early eighties.

#### CONSOLIDATION OF THE NEW ORDER

Immediately after the revolution and while the Bazargan government was still in power, the Fundamentalists had undertaken measures to ensure their supremacy in Iran. What concerned them even more than the political opposition was the loyalty of the Armed Forces. Traditionally considered pro-Shah, particularly the officer corps, the Armed Forces had literally disintegrated during the revolution but were now being reconstituted, purged of royalist elements. Nevertheless, an Armed Forces coup, aided and abetted by the United States, remained a distinct possibility during any one of the numerous political crises the country was undergoing. The Fundamentalists decided to strengthen their position by encouraging the growth of grassroots organizations. They set up Islamic societies in schools, factories, government offices and military bases, and employed religious students to foster revolutionary and Islamic sentiment amongst the masses. Some theology students were also appointed as "Friday-prayer" Imams in towns and villages to counter the influence of political as well as religious opponents.<sup>5</sup> Some

grassroot organizations took on a paramilitary character. "Examples include Pasdaran-e Enqelab-e Islami (Islamic Revolutionary Guards), Bassij-e Mostazafin (Mobilization of the Oppressed) and Komitehs, or neighborhood committees in charge of security and food distribution."<sup>6</sup> The Pasdaran and the Bassij are highly motivated and strong forces, and today are the mainstay of Islamic Fundamentalism in Iran. They have also taken active part in the Iraq-Iran War, "heeding Ayatollah Khomeini's call for martyrdom as the highest form of participation in the process of strengthening Islam."<sup>7</sup>

The role of the Pasdaran and the Komitehs in the early days has aroused much controversy. They were made responsible for safeguarding the gains of the revolution and were "the eyes and ears, and the avenging hands, of the Islamic regime."<sup>8</sup> They definitely committed excesses as did the revolutionary courts responsible for "eradicating corruption on earth," which ultimately resulted in thousands of executions. But many of those executed were either royalists who had played a particularly active role in perpetuating the Shah's tyranny or leftist guerrillas responsible for plotting against the Islamic Republic or assassinating leading clerics and government officials.<sup>9</sup> Since the early eighties, however, a measure of normalcy has returned and the early excesses have been moderated.<sup>10</sup> But it must be understood that punishments according to Islamic law continue to be meted out after due legal processes. After all Iran remains an Islamic Republic.

#### THE POLITICAL PROCESS

The Islamic Republicans showed a remarkable expeditiousness in preparing a constitution and electing a Majles; the whole process took less than two years. But from the very outset they faced a great dilemma: how to retain the Islamic character of the country while working through the ballot box. On

one point, however, there was no doubt: in the Islamic Republic all power was to God and not to the people as was the case in Western democracies.

Elections were meant only to elect a suitable God-fearing Muslim who could administer the state according to His laws. To prevent a secular takeover of the government through the ballot box, the office of Velayat Faqih (religious trustee, guardian or leader) was instituted above that of the President. "The Constitution provides that a Velayat Faqih will carry the burden of leadership in the continuing absence of the Twelfth Imam."<sup>11</sup> He has to be pious, just, enlightened, sagacious, courageous and competent. At the present time the Constitution decrees that Ayatollah Khomeini is just such a trustee. The constitution also decrees that future faqihs will be clergymen. The Velayat Faqih has the power to virtually pick the president, by vetoing nominations of potential candidates, and he also holds the appointment of the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces.<sup>12</sup>

Below the Faqih is the Council of Guardians (a council for the protection of the Islamic constitution) which has twelve members including six mujtahids. The elected government, thus, has two institutions supervising its activities.

This Constitution has been approved by the public and has withstood the test of several elections. Above all the Pasdaran and the Bassij, each numbering in hundreds of thousands, are its loyal defenders. Those who hope for a collapse of the Islamic Republic, after Ayatollah Khomeini's departure from the scene, perhaps, do not fully comprehend the strength of the system evolved to defend the Islamic revolution and the widespread acceptance it continues to enjoy from the Iranian people. Furthermore, the succession process established by Ayatollah Khomeini himself is likely to achieve a smooth transition. The immense prestige that he enjoys amongst his countrymen will ensure this.

## THE FUNDAMENTALIST WORLD VIEW

Farhang Rajaee writes:

The early Muslim jurists divided the world in terms of its relation to the Shariah, into Dar al-Islam and Dar el-Harb. Dar al-Islam was applied to those communities over which Shariah had jurisdiction. Although they were not required to be Muslims, monotheism was a pre-requisite for becoming part of the Islamic society. It was a pax-Islamica comprised of Muslims and non-Muslims, the latter having submitted to Muslim sovereignty. Dar al-Harb was the opposite of Dar al-Islam, and it was used to refer to those communities who were hostile to the Muslims security and interests.<sup>13</sup>

But very soon this black and white division entered grey areas. So two subsidiary categories were allowed: the Dar al-Sulh, or those who maintained a tributary relationship with Islam and Dar al-Movadea or those who formed a truce with the Islamic state.<sup>14</sup>

Ayatollah Khomeini divides the world into the same two categories, but calls them the Mostazafan (the oppressed) and the Mostakbaran (the oppressors), in this case the oppressed being the subjugated people of the world including, of course, Iran and the oppressors being the superpowers.<sup>15</sup> He does not differentiate between the United States or the Soviet Union when he states: "The threat to the world today stems from the two superpowers. They have manipulated the whole world under their control and use it for their interests."<sup>16</sup> The rest of the non-Islamic world (except for certain hostile Western states), obviously, fall in the category of Dar al-Movadea, thus escaping the ire of the Islam Republic.

As regards waging of war, Shiite theology differentiates between expansionist and defensive war, the former to be conducted only by the Twelfth Imam after his reappearance.<sup>17</sup> In the meantime only defensive war can be conducted. As Ayatollah Khomeini states: "We have no intention of fighting against any country, Islamic or non-Islamic. We desire peace and amity among

all nations. Up to date we are engaged only in self defense which is both God-given and a human right."<sup>18</sup>

The process of export of the revolution to other Muslim states and the world needs further elaboration. As regards the need for doing so, Ayatollah Khomeini states:

The Iranian Revolution is not exclusively that of Iran, because Islam does not belong to any particular people. Islam is revealed for mankind and the Muslims, not for Iran. . . . Any Islamic movement, therefore, cannot limit itself to any particular country, not even to the Islamic countries; it is the continuation of the revolution by the prophets.<sup>19</sup>

But he also adds: "When we say we want to export our revolution we mean we would like to export this spirituality which dominates Iran. . . . We have no intention to attack anyone with swords or other arms."<sup>20</sup> And as regards the means of exportation he states:

. . . one can say that propaganda rules the world. The best device that can implement the revolution in Iran and export it into other places is propaganda. Do not exaggerate anything. We have such a commodity that it requires no exaggeration.<sup>21</sup>

### ANALYSIS

The Shah had inherited from his father the popular colonial notion that socioeconomic development and Westernization went together. Despite the not insignificant gains achieved by his White Revolution, the Shah's overall policies totally ignored the ethos of his people and his era. During the period when monarchies were on the wane, or certainly adopting low profiles all over the world, his obvious neglect of his people's religious and cultural values and costly efforts at self-aggrandizement clearly indicated that he was "out of tune" with his subjects.

Socioeconomic frustrations and political tyranny will invariably turn a Muslim people towards religion, for Islam is ever-present and permeates the day-to-day activities of Muslim society. The notion that the revolutionary movement had its origins in socioeconomic and political factors and was subsequently "hijacked" by the fundamentalists is certainly unrealistic. In fact, none but the ulama could have led the movement to its ultimate success.

The theocratic and almost utopian world-view of fundamentalist Iran may not withstand the harsh realities of world politics. Already, the pressures generated by the Gulf War are forcing her towards pragmatism. As time goes by, one should witness an increasing realism and moderation in Iran's relations with the rest of the world.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Farhang Rajaee, Islam and Politics: Ayat-ollah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeyni's Fundamental Political Ideas, pp. 120-125.
2. Nader Entessar, Mass Political Participation in Revolutionary Iran, pp. 4-5.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., p. 6.
5. Sepehr Zabih, Iran Since the Revolution, p. 34.
6. Entessar, p. 7.
7. Ibid.
8. John Simpson, "Along the Streets of Tehran," Harper's Magazine, January 1988, p. 38.
9. Ibid., p. 39.
10. Ibid.
11. Enver M. Koury, "The Ayatollah Revolution: Lack of Consensus on Fundamentals," in Revolution in Iran: A Reappraisal, ed. by Enver M. Koury and Charles G. MacDonald, p. 74.

12. Ibid., p. 75.
13. Rajae, pp. 176-177.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., p. 178.
16. Ibid., p. 171.
17. Ibid., p. 197.
18. Ibid., p. 198.
19. Ibid., p. 185.
20. Ibid., p. 186.
21. Ibid., p. 187.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC'S RELATIONS WITH THE WORLD

Today we don't make any decisions, great or small, under the influence of foreign powers and a blasphemous country like the Soviet Union or an imperialist aggressive country like America.

Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani

Iran's geopolitical significance in the Persian Gulf and the world is well established and need not be reemphasized here. The loss of this "linch pin" state to the United States was rightly termed as a "stunningly ominous event" by Richard Nixon.<sup>1</sup> During the years following this event, Iran has not been receptive to diplomatic overtures of the West in general and the United States in particular. While the Islamic Republic's conception of its place in the world has already been discussed in the previous chapter, this chapter deals with Iranian attempts to put theory into practice in a world essentially hostile to radical and fundamentalist creeds.

#### THE BASIC PRINCIPLES

A Western mind searching for a method or conventional wisdom in the Islamic Republic's conduct of international relations is liable to be disappointed; firstly, because the fundamentalist's stark and simple division of the world into good and bad is difficult to comprehend and accept in contemporary times, and secondly, because, notwithstanding the Foreign Ministry policy papers and experts, it is ultimately Ayatollah Khomeini's word that dictates Iranian foreign policy. Although it is believed that during the past few years he has withdrawn from an active role in national policy making, he definitely continues to provide a general direction which forms the basis for governmental policies.

The Islamic Republic's view of the world and Iran's role in it is deeply influenced by five factors. Firstly is the Quranic concept of the oppressors inheriting and ruling the earth.<sup>2</sup> Ayatollah Khomeini interprets this in terms of the struggle between the superpowers and their allies (the Mostakbaran) and the developing nations (the Mustazafan). Secondly is the concept of unity of all Muslim peoples under one government which derives its legitimacy from God and inspiration from the Quran, the Shariah and the Imamate. Nationalism, of course, is frowned upon and considered an invention of the West. Thirdly is Iran's history of exploitation by the West and Russia. Fourthly is the quantum and timing of support provided by various countries to the Islamic Revolution. And lastly is Iran's new found confidence and independence which has enabled her to successfully withstand the "pressures and machinations" of both the superpowers.

#### THE THREAT PERCEPTION

Viewed in the historical perspective, almost the entire world is inimical to the Iranian fundamentalists. To be realistic, most of the threats are real, although they may be somewhat exaggerated. The United States would certainly like to replace the fundamentalist regime with a liberal democratic system. The Soviet Union, despite its comparatively better relations with Iran, as a rule encourages leftist elements. Most Arabs would like to see Iraq get the upper hand in the Gulf War, regardless of the troubles that a victorious Iraq would create in the region. Even the moderate Islamic states find radical Shiite fundamentalism and its potential for export a serious threat and openly express hostility towards the Islamic Republic.

Perhaps, it is this multi-dimensional threat perception that has brought about a measure of realism and pragmatism to Iranian foreign policy, as

against the extremism of the initial days. Even the fundamentalists now realize that Iran cannot exist and prosper while all the world's important nations are in the "other camp."

#### THE "GREAT SATAN" AND HER ALLIES

The present state of Iranian-American relations is definitely an odd phenomenon in international affairs: a situation where "the usual premises of diplomacy are turned upside down" and "one government wants no relations at all with another government."<sup>3</sup> As Iran's ambassador to the United Nations, Sa'id Raja'i Khorasani, stated in a television interview in 1983: "The kind of relations we have with the United States are exactly what the people of Iran want. They are perfect. And they are altogether a lack of relations. In the future, (we) hope the situation will remain the same."<sup>4</sup>

Measured against the five factors that influence the Iranian world view, the United States never stood a chance. The "Great Satan" has a lot to account for, particularly during the last days of the Shah and the immediate aftermath of the revolution. But the question arises; why do not the Iranians feel the necessity to establish normal (not special) relations with the United States? Why does Ayatollah Khomeini state that America is Iran's "number one enemy?"<sup>5</sup> And viewed in this context what is the status of that "blasphemous country," the Soviet Union. There is no clear cut answer to these questions. But it is quite evident that the leaders of the Islamic Republic are demolishing the traditional perception that third world countries must appease the superpowers in return for a certain measure of control over their own destinies. The "Great Satan," due to the bitterness between the two, happens to be the prime manifestation of this policy. Furthermore, in the struggle

between the oppressors and the oppressed, the Islamic Republic expects and gives no quarter and unequivocally states that the future for Iran lies in "neither West nor East, only Islam."<sup>6</sup> And as regards the United States, Ayatollah Khomeini has declared:

America is worse than Britain; Britain is worse than America. The Soviet Union is worse than both of them. . . . But today it is America that we are concerned with. . . . All of our troubles today are caused by America and Israel.<sup>7</sup>

Those who expect or hope for reestablishment of normal diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States have a long wait ahead of them.

It is not possible in this paper to discuss and analyze all that has occurred between Iran and the United States during the past decade. But it is certainly necessary to mention the overriding American dilemma regarding Iran. The United States desires a strong Iran to face Soviet threats to her independence and sovereignty but not strong enough to pose a substantial threat to the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia and Israel.<sup>8</sup> American foreign policy has found it extremely difficult to resolve this dilemma, particularly, when one party refuses even to talk to the other.

Compared to the United States, her West European allies have fared much better in their relations with the Islamic Republic. This is due firstly to their policy of appeasement towards the Islamic Republic because of trade considerations, and secondly, Iran's increasing pragmatism in the face of pressures generated by the Gulf War. Western Europe has continued to make large scale purchases of Iranian oil and some countries have exported arms and other strategic material to Iran--at least until 1985.

Strangely, the old preeminence of Britain as the original exploitative imperial power and a staunch supporter of American neocolonialism during the past fifty years has disappeared. Although occasionally coupled with the

United States, Margaret Thatcher's Britain is considered too weak to figure in the Islamic Republic's consideration. France, however, continues to draw ire because of arms sales to Iraq and her readiness to provide asylum to the government's political foes. In the ultimate analysis, however, most European Allies of the United States are to be considered amongst the oppressors.

#### SOVIET DILEMMAS

The Iranian experience with Tsarist and later Communist Russia is extremely unpleasant, and the godless creed preached by the communists is, obviously, not at all acceptable to the fundamentalists. Despite these handicaps, the Soviet Union has one great advantage, her geographical proximity to Iran. This and her reputation for punishing perceived insults has forced a considerable degree of pragmatism and circumspection in Iran's policies towards the Soviet Union. Thus, in contrast to weak American reaction to the hostage crisis, it is widely believed that the Soviet Union forestalled a similar bid to take over her embassy by threatening drastic consequences.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the obvious Soviet gains over the United States because of the revolution, the former's dilemma regarding the future course of relations with Iran closely mirrors the one faced by the latter. The Soviets are seriously concerned about Iranian plans to export their revolutionary creed, while they are also careful to avoid pushing Iran towards closer ties with the West. This forces them to tread a very careful course, so as not to antagonize the extremist elements amongst the fundamentalists.

Since the revolution, the Soviet Union has attempted to emphasize several themes in her relations with Iran. Firstly, she has attempted to encourage and foster the existing hostility between Iran and the United States through

all possible means. Secondly, she has attempted to increase Iranian political and economic dependence on the Soviet Union, highlighting the areas of mutual congruence of interests while down-playing the one major detriment--the animosity between Islam and communism. And thirdly, she has sought to defuse Iranian hostility towards her regional policies, particularly Afghanistan.

An important consideration that weighs heavily with the Soviet Union is the potential susceptibility of her Muslim Central Asian minorities to resurgent Islam. At the present moment, Moscow appears in full control of the situation, but unforeseen changes can occur with great rapidity as the Iranian experience itself illustrates.

Soon after the revolution, Iran renounced the "Treaty of Friendship" signed between the two countries in 1921.<sup>10</sup> The Islamic regime felt that the clauses giving Moscow the right to intervene in Iran could be invoked during the initial unstable period. But the Soviet Union has refused to accept this unilateral step. However, despite United States beliefs to the contrary, the possibility of a direct invasion of Iran by the Soviet Union appears extremely far fetched, particularly after the latter's experiences in Afghanistan and the effective elimination of pro-Soviet elements in Iran in 1983. It is believed that opposition to such a Soviet adventure would simply be too strong and "fanatically motivated" to allow the invading forces much comfort. Of course, the Soviets could soften the target by political intrigue and subversion before taking such an action, but that also appears unlikely to succeed considering the strength of Islamic fundamentalism in the country today. Nor is there a likelihood of a serious succession struggle after Ayatollah Khomeini's departure from the scene that could be exploited by the Soviets.

## THE GULF WAR

Undoubtedly, Iraq's war against Iran was meant to annul the consequences of the 1975 Algiers Accord which in Iraq's perception was unequal; the Shah's power being at its very peak when it was signed. But, perhaps, a more important objective of the war was the destruction of Shiite fundamentalism, before it could consolidate inside Iran and pose a subsequent threat to the neighboring Arab nations. What ultimately happened was exactly the opposite. The War helped the fundamentalists to eliminate their enemies and consolidate the revolution.

An interesting aspect of the war is the Iraqi effort to depict it as an ethnic conflict between the Persians (Ajamites) and the Arabs. Both sides have also endeavored to exploit ethnic and sectarian differences without much success. But with the presence of Libya, Syria and Algeria in the Iranian camp, the Persian versus Arab slogan has lost some of its credibility, although the Arab League continues to pass "unanimous" resolutions against Iran.

The role of the superpowers in this conflict has been ambiguous and inconsistent. The Soviet Union has attempted to straddle both camps with a certain degree of success. The United States was, perhaps, a party to the initiation of the War, hoping to bring down the fundamentalist regime.<sup>11</sup> Having failed to achieve this objective she has tended to side with the Iraqis (despite Saddam's Baathist affiliations) but has also taken care not to irretrievably antagonize the Iranians with an eye on the "succession struggle" after the demise of Ayatollah Khomeini. The resultant policy has turned into a "no win" game. The Iranians, strategically the most important--are nevertheless antagonized beyond retrieval; the Iraqis are dissatisfied with

the lukewarm American support (in any case the character of the Saddam Regime bodes ill for the future of Iraqi-American relations); and the moderate Arab states are worried about the extent of United States commitment to their security, despite the ongoing but rather limited American reflagging operation in the Gulf.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Richard Nixon, The Real War, p. 83.
2. Farhang Rajaee, Islam and Politics: Ayat-allah Ruhollah Musavi Khomeyni's Fundamental Political Ideas, p. 178.
3. Barry Rubin, "The State of U.S.-Iran Relations," in Iran Since the Revolution, ed. by Barry M. Rosen, p. 99.
4. Ibid.
5. Rajaee, p. 173.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p. 174.
8. Rubin, p. 101.
9. Sepehr Zabih, Iran Since the Revolution, p. 173.
10. Zalmay Khalilzad, "Soviet Dilemmas in Khomeini's Iran," in Iran Since the Revolution, ed. by Barry M. Rosen, p. 119.
11. For whatever it's worth, this is a widely held assumption in the Muslim World.

## CHAPTER XII

### UNITED STATES POLICY OPTIONS AND THE FUTURE

Despite the numerous variables, it is still possible to gauge the future trends, at least in the short term, in the Gulf region. But what is more difficult is to suggest policy options to the United States viz-a-viz Iran, a nation that has demolished the conventional rules of the game, leaving the rest of the world in a state of incomprehension and confusion. But the game must go on, and the rest of the world has to find a way to deal with Iran. Her importance in the region demands that.

#### POLICY OPTIONS

Any discussion on American policy regarding Iran--the "regional strategic prize"--must be conducted in the context of the entire Persian Gulf, with its immense political, ethnic and cultural diversities. Unfortunately, American policy perspectives have been badly skewed by Iran's actions and rhetoric in the postrevolution period. Some of these actions were certainly unjustified and against the accepted norms of international conduct. But, perhaps, some of the rhetoric was justified, keeping in mind American policies during the Pahlavi era. It is no more certain whether the current United States policies will do much towards the attaining of her long term objectives, namely, the security of Gulf oil and sealanes, the containment of Soviet expansion and influence in the Gulf region, and the ensuring of regional stability and peaceful change.

Since Iran is and will continue to remain the pivotal player in the Gulf drama, the United States in the current "no relations" environment will face definite problems in the pursuit of her objectives. American policy makers have to understand that the apparently irrational Iranian policies are

rational if viewed from the fundamentalist perspective, and that they have to learn to live with this phenomenon--at least in the short term. Under the prevailing circumstances the United States has three policy options: the present policy which carries the burden of the past and an inability to operate under the new set of rules, an activist policy aimed at achieving a favorable change by bringing down the fundamentalist regime, or a policy of benign indifference (for the lack of a better phrase).

The present U.S. policy has been quite successful in maintaining the regional status quo, which is not a mean achievement in the prevailing circumstances. But there is an apparent inability to reconcile the long term objectives mentioned in the preceding paragraphs with the short term interests, i.e., preventing Iraq's military defeat, securing free passage in the Gulf for Kuwait's tanker fleet, a quantum improvement in the security of moderate Arab allies and Israel, and countering terrorism. And each of the forementioned interests if analyzed in depth appears inconsequential and illusory.

Iraq is not the most important state in the region nor is she in need of American support to stave off a military defeat. Besides, as mentioned earlier, Iraq has never been very friendly to the United States. An overt commitment to support Iraq at the behest of the moderate Arab states appears, at best, to be of dubious advantage to the latter.

The reflagging of Kuwaiti tankers--while disregarding similar requests from closer allies--has not diminished the number of attacks on allied and neutral shipping and has only placed in a state of considerable vulnerability a substantial number of American warships. In any case, it is not in Iran's interest to hinder shipping in the Gulf and it is widely believed that the

introduction of the American fleet was precipitated by Iraq's attacks on neutral shipping--her own oil flow is not dependent on the Gulf.

The form and quantum of threat posed to the moderate Arab states by revolutionary Iran cannot be correctly and objectively discussed as long as the Gulf War continues. But it is possible that the former are unnecessarily nervous, because, in the post-Gulf War scenario, Iran cannot be strong enough to take successful military (naval) action against these states, nor does the region appear particularly ripe--at least in the short term--for the Iranian revolutionary creed. It must also be noted that the lines in the Gulf War have been drawn on an ethnic and not sectarian basis.

After the departure of U.S. citizens from Iran, there have been few cases of terrorism conclusively linked to the latter. Lebanese Shiite groups certainly draw inspiration and, perhaps, some guidance from Iran, but they are active inside Lebanon only and the complicated political situation does not allow an accurate assessment of Iranian involvement. In any case, Lebanese extremism, as long as it remains within the country, does not pose much of a threat to Western interests.

In the pursuit of the forementioned interests, the United States has, perhaps, lost sight of her long term objectives. She is also in the process of irretrievably alienating the pivotal nation in the Persian Gulf, which holds large oil reserves, lies on the most likely Soviet route to the Gulf, and is also best located to control ingress into the Gulf.

An activist policy would imply exploiting of external and internal opposition as well as overt military and economic pressures to bring down the fundamentalists. The implementation of this policy, however, may be difficult; firstly, because external opposition is weak, divided and mostly leftist, while active internal opposition is minimal, and secondly, because a

world consensus on economic sanctions is well-nigh impossible. Overt military pressure can never be so strong as to result in the removal of the regime, while anything short of that would only serve to mobilize and consolidate national resolve. Above all, such a policy holds the portents of pushing the country into the Soviet camp, besides alienating a significant part of the Islamic world, both most undesirable possibilities to say the least.

The only feasible policy option, therefore, is that of benign indifference, in the hope that, some time in the future, relations between Iran and the United States could be normalized. Expecting more than this at this stage would be totally unrealistic. In the meantime, American policy should be aimed at "damage control," without antagonizing the Iranians any further. Some of the important steps that could be taken in this regard are:

- o Encouraging the moderate Arab countries in the Gulf region to accept a greater military burden for their own defense and that of the sealandes. The United States reflagging operation must be rapidly scaled down and, thereafter, terminated. This would eliminate the possibility of a direct military confrontation with Iran, which, if it occurs, would put a historical seal on the Iranian--American struggle.

- o Encouraging a de facto coalition between the old CENTO countries (Iran, Pakistan and Turkey) to strengthen Iran's ability to withstand Soviet expansionism. It is indeed propitious that their mutual relations continue to be fairly good.

- o Encouraging the OIC (Organization of Islamic Conference) to continue its occasionally tenuous contacts with Iran, and to attempt a resolution of the Iran-Iraq conflict.

- o With the moderate Arab States suitably strengthened, assuming a "positively impartial" role in the Gulf conflict.

o Quietly encouraging educational and technological contacts with Iran to create possible diplomatic openings in due course.

#### SHORT TERM TRENDS

In the short term, five to ten years, Iran appears to have a fairly stable future, despite the problems that she faces. The government is effectively in control of all the instruments of state and enjoys the support of the majority of the people. The political system effectively incorporates in the revolutionary process, through the Pasdaran and the Basij, Ayatollah Khomeini's main constituency: the hitherto disaffected urban and rural population. It is these cadres who also countervail the Iranian armed forces and would contest any coup attempt the latter could make.

Ayatollah Khomeini has taken adequate measures for a smooth succession after his departure. Despite dire predictions, the prevailing political environment appears quite conducive for a trouble free transition. It can also be asserted that the person (or group) who succeeds him is unlikely to make drastic policy changes in the short term, since Ayatollah Khomeini is certain to gain in stature after his death and his pronouncements might become sacrosanct for his immediate successors.

An immediate end to the Iran-Iraq War is only possible either with the removal of Saddam Hussain or, if Ayatollah Khomeini decrees so, for whatever reason he deems fit. Otherwise, the War would continue, despite all the pressures that the world community can exert on Iran.

The obvious antipathy between Islam and communism will continue to dog Soviet-Iranian relations. However, a Soviet attack on Iran appears very unlikely, even in the worst case, civil war scenario. The increased capability of USCENTCOM is one obvious reason; but what is more of a

deterrent is the spirit of the Islamic revolution that continues to galvanize the vast majority of the people. In fact, a Russian threat could mobilize the national will in the same manner that the Gulf War has done.

In the short term, a normalization of relations between Iran and the United States appears unlikely. Perhaps, once the Gulf War is over and the former feels less threatened, she might open her doors for the sake of trade and technology that the latter can provide. In the meantime, a nonaligned but troublesome Iran appears in prospect for the United States.

Revolutionary Iran will remain the fountainhead of the fundamentalist Islamic creed. She is likely to exploit her sympathizers in neighboring moderate states to encourage fundamentalist tendencies. But the use of force in exporting the revolution does not appear likely, particularly since the moderate states are reacting to this threat by strengthening their defense forces.

It would be incorrect to assume that radicalism is--and would continue to be--restricted to the Shiite branch of Islam. In fact, Sunnis in many countries of Asia and Africa draw inspiration from Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution. A resurgence of Islam, now evident all over the world, might in some nations follow the Iranian example.

#### LONG TERM PROSPECTS

These are changing times in Muslim lands. The tide of history which forced their colonial masters to withdraw is now--four decades later--forcing them to reevaluate all that the West left behind. Freedom for many has been a sad and disappointing experience. And there is a danger that in their frustration they may jettison the good with the bad that the West has to offer.

Undoubtedly the past few decades have witnessed a resurgence of Islam, this being a logical outcome of the process of decolonization. The educated elites in the Islamic world are turning increasingly towards their faith and searching for solutions of their temporal problems through this route. To many, particularly the young with all their idealism, the Iranian experience is attractive. As a well known expert on the Middle East, George A. Nader, writes, "they compare Iran before and after its revolution, and see how powerfully the Iranians have been transformed. They see Iran as not only being independent, but also capable of challenging both superpowers."<sup>1</sup> Iran, therefore, might not be an isolated aberration but the manifestation of a historical trend in the Islamic World which transcends racial, ethnic and sectarian groupings. This possibility might also sweep away the upholders of the status-quo--the moderate monarchies in the region--in the next few decades, unless, of course, the existing order is drastically reformed. It is essential that the West accept this possible trend and foster evolutionary change in the region.

As regards Iran, in the long term the revolution is bound to mellow and open to the West; the Soviet Union is simply too close for comfort and professes a creed that runs against all that Islam stands for. At the same time, it is hoped that the West would acquire a much better understanding of the phenomenon of which Iran is the prime manifestation.

#### ENDNOTE

1. George A. Nader, "Iran: New Destiny in the Muslim World," Middle East Insight, January-February 1988, p. 19

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